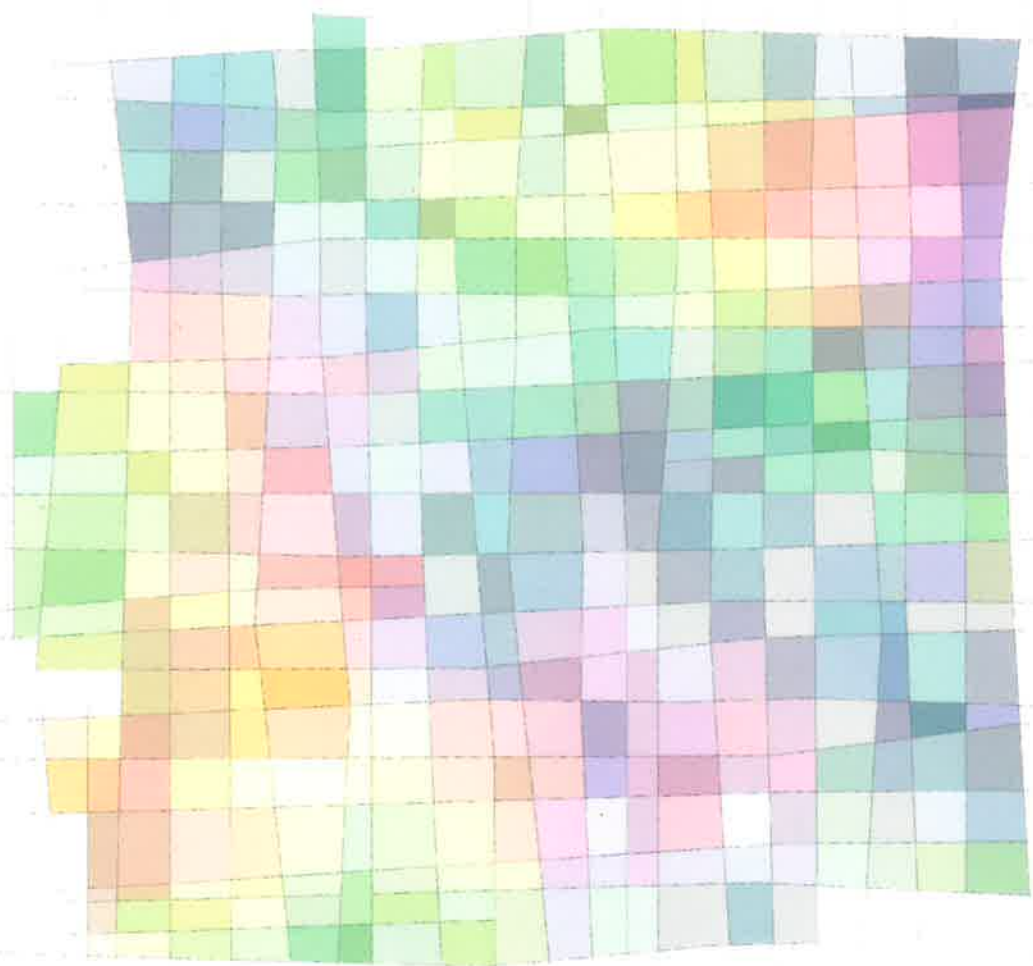


Urban Microcosms 1789–1940



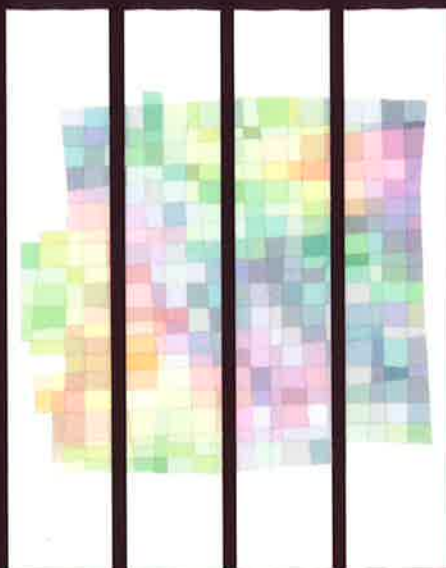
**Edited by
Margit Dirscherl and Astrid Köhler**

imlr books

Urban microcosms are small-scale communal spaces that are integral to, or integrated into, city life. Some, such as railway stations or department stores, are typically located in city centres. Others, such as parks, are less quintessentially metropolitan, whilst harbours or beaches are often located on the peripheries of cities or outside them altogether. All are part of a network of nodes establishing connections in and beyond the city. Together, they shape and inflect the infrastructure of modern life.

By introducing the concept of urban microcosm into social, cultural, and literary studies, this interdisciplinary volume challenges the widely held assumption that city life is evenly spread across its spaces. Sixteen case studies focus on selected urban microcosms from across Europe between 1789 and 1940, and examine the external appearance, representation, histories, and internal rules of these organizational structures and facilities. In so doing, they contribute to an understanding of modernity and of the impact of the dynamics of urban life on human experience and intersubjectivity.

Margit Dirscherl is Lecturer in German at St Hugh's, University of Oxford. Astrid Köhler is Professor of German Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies at Queen Mary University of London.



INSTITUTE OF
MODERN
LANGUAGES
RESEARCH

SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

Published by the
Institute of Modern Languages Research
School of Advanced Study
University of London
<http://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk>

Urban Microcosms
1789–1940

edited by

Margit Dirscherl and Astrid Köhler

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Institute of Modern Languages Research

2019

Published by the

Institute of Modern Languages Research

School of Advanced Study, University of London

Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU

<http://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk>

© Elio Baldi, Oliver Brett, Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren, Margit Dirscherl, Lucy Duggan, Sven Hanuschek, Charles Jones, Botakoz Kassymbekova, Astrid Köhler, Esther Leslie, Robert Lethbridge, David Peleman, Andrea Penso, Cristina Sasse, Markus Schiegg, Godela Weiss-Sussex, 2019

The authors have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the authors and the publisher.

Cover image
Judith Köhler © 2018

First published 2019

ISBN 978-0-85457-266-3

Contents

List of Illustrations		vii
Acknowledgements		ix
Introduction: Towards a Phenomenology of Urban Microcosms		1
<i>Margit Dirscherl and Astrid Köhler</i>		
I EXTERIOR PLACES		13
1. <i>Jardins publics and jardins privés: Fictions of Urbanity in Nineteenth-Century Paris</i>		15
<i>Robert Lethbridge</i>		
2. Marcel Proust's 'lieu factice' and the Urban Microcosm		33
<i>Oliver Brett</i>		
3. The Eye of the Storm: Deceleration in Literary Depictions of Railway Stations		51
<i>Margit Dirscherl</i>		
4. Harboursing Urbanity		65
<i>Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren</i>		
II INTERIOR PLACES		81
5. 'What does New York City denote anyway? Big city is big city. I have been to Hanover often enough': Museum and Department Store in Arno Schmidt's <i>Aus dem Leben eines Fauns</i>		83
<i>Sven Hanuschek</i>		
6. The Department Store as Habitat of the Sophisticated Urbanite: Georg Hermann's <i>Der kleine Gast</i> (1925)		101
<i>Godela Weiss-Sussex</i>		

7.	'Kafka didn't often come to the café': The Prague Café as a Space of Memory <i>Lucy Duggan</i>	115
8.	New Temples — Restaurants as Places of Modern Urbanity in Russia's <i>fin de siècle</i> : The Restaurant as a New Sacred Place <i>Botakoz Kassymbekova</i>	129
9.	Views of Italian Urban Microcosms in Giacomo Leopardi's Work <i>Andrea Penso</i>	141
III	DISCURSIVE SPACES	155
10.	Waves and Globes in Walter Benjamin's Microcosmic Cities <i>Esther Leslie</i>	157
11.	'For public business or amusements': Places and Spaces of Urbanity in Town Directories, 1760–1820 <i>Cristina Sasse</i>	179
12.	For Whom Tolls the Bell? The Changing Meaning of Church Bells in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literary Descriptions of Villages and Cities <i>Elio Baldi</i>	193
IV	NETWORKS BEYOND THE CITIES	207
13.	Replicating and Representing the Abandoned City: Artists' Coastal Colonies and Depictions of the Seashore <i>Charles Jones</i>	209
14.	Nineteenth-Century Spa Towns and Urban Microcosms: The Case of Karlovy Vary <i>Astrid Köhler</i>	225
15.	Patient Narratives as Distorted Mirrors: Letters from a Nineteenth-Century Psychiatric Hospital <i>Markus Schiegg</i>	239
16.	<i>Les Hommes de la Route</i> in the <i>Boudoir</i> : The Road Conference as an Urban Microcosm (1910–38) <i>David Peleman</i>	257
	Notes on Contributors	271
	Bibliography	275
	Index	303

List of Illustrations

Chapter 1

- | | | |
|---|---|----|
| 1 | Édouard Manet, <i>Vue de l'Exposition Universelle de 1867</i> [<i>View of the 1867 Universal Exhibition</i>], 1867, oil on canvas, 108 × 196.5 cm, National Museum, Oslo. | 15 |
| 2 | Édouard Manet, <i>Le Chemin de fer</i> [<i>The Railway</i>], 1873, oil on canvas, 93.3 × 111.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. | 27 |

Chapter 4

- | | | |
|---|---|----|
| 1 | [the big signs the english words and the english accent of the harbour slang
Porch 68 hangar shed Kattendijk Z W petrol tank]. One of the harbour poems from <i>Bezette stad</i> by Paul van Ostaijen (Antwerp: Het Sienjaal, 1921). | 67 |
| 2 | Port and City of Antwerp. Google Earth: Image Landset | 71 |
| 3 | Urban expansion of Rotterdam. Map by Marcel IJsselstijn and Arnoud de Waaijer from the <i>Atlas van de verstedelijking in Nederland. 1000 jaar ruimtelijke ontwikkeling</i> , ed. by Reinout Rutte and Jaap Evert Abrahamse | 74 |
| 4 | Hook of Holland and Rotterdam. Google Earth: Image © 2016 Aerodata International Surveys | 74 |
| 5 | IJmuiden and Amsterdam. | 76 |

Chapter 11

- | | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | J. Gore, <i>The Liverpool Directory, For the Year 1766</i> (Liverpool 1766), title page. | 180 |
| 2 | Richard Weston, <i>The Leicester Directory, describing the bankers, manufacturers, and principal tradesmen with their places of residence, also the professors of law, physic &</i> | |

16. *Les Hommes de la Route* in the *Boudoir*: The Road Conference as an Urban Microcosm (1910–38)

David Peleman

Monsieur le Président, Mesdames, Messieurs, Cette semaine a été une féerie. En même temps, elle a édifié un laboratoire dont les résultats s'étendront, et méthodiquement, à l'univers [...].

[Mister Chairman, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, This week has been like a dream world. At the same time, the week has established a laboratory and its results will reach out, in a methodological way, to the entire universe [...].]

— Charles Lagasse de Locht.¹

Ce n'est plus La Distinction entre science et politique que nous cherchons à décrire [...] mais celles, au pluriel, entre des compositions de *mondes*. Il ne s'agit plus de définir ce qu'est l'univers pour ensuite en tirer des règles d'action, mais de forcer chaque partie à expliciter son ou ses *cosmos*.

[It's no longer The Distinction between science and politics we aim to describe [...] but rather those, plural, between the compositions of *worlds*. It's no longer about defining what is the universe in order to deduce rules of action, but it's a matter of forcing every party involved to make explicit her or their *cosmos*.]

— Bruno Latour.²

1 Association Internationale Permanente des Congrès de la Route, *Ier Congrès International de la Route*, Paris 1908. *Compte rendu des travaux du congrès* (Paris: Générale Lahure, 1909), p. 381. Opening sentence of the speech by Lagasse de Locht at the closing session of the conference. Translations throughout this chapter are my own.

2 Bruno Latour, *Cogitamus. Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), p. 167.

Entering the *Boudoir* of Urbanization

Urbanization, understood here as the emergence of an urban culture that went hand in hand with the process of industrialization, has been described in a variety of ways in scholarly literature.³ Researchers have pointed in diverse — sometimes even opposite — directions when it comes to describing the causes of this process. Some have addressed the emergence of an urban culture as the emancipation of minorities claiming access to urban facilities, as explained for example by Manuel Castells in *The City and the Grassroots*.⁴ Others have grounded the development of urbanity in the emergence of an elite culture that has tried to grasp control over flows of capital, real estate development, and industrial growth.⁵ Both interpretations make sense, and they contribute significantly to our understanding of urbanization. This chapter takes an approach that steers a middle course between those two opposites. It does not describe how a group tried to get a decisive grip on the city — top-down or bottom-up — but explores a moment of transition when a new group of people organizes itself and starts contributing to the urbanization of the territory in an unprecedented way. It is a moment when the process of urbanization and the actors involved in this process are being reshuffled — and where Castells meets Harvey, so to speak. The *boudoir*, as an in-between space, reflects this transitional situation, and *Les Hommes de la Route* is a group of people passing through the *boudoir* at the start of the twentieth century. *Les Hommes de la Route* is the *nom de guerre* [battle name] or the *nom de plume* [pen name] of a group who gathered at that time to set up a campaign for the promotion and construction of a modern road network in concrete or asphalt, adapted to the increasingly motorized traffic in Belgium. The period from 1908 to 1940 is a crucial time in the formation of *Les Hommes de la Route* and their project: not because the most advanced roads were built during that period — the post-war era is far more important from that point of view — but because during the first decades of the twentieth century a new collaboration is established between various stakeholders — the government, motorists, manu-

3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Françoise Choay, *L'Urbanisme, utopies et réalités: une anthologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1965).

4 Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Arnold, 1983).

5 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); *Urban Modernity. Cultural Innovation in the Second Industrial Revolution*, ed. by Miriam Levin and others (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

facturers, industrials — for the construction of modern roads. The road conference serves as a pivotal event in this process and, as I will try to explain, it has all the qualities of an urban microcosm. Thus, this chapter brings to attention two different topics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the notion of the urban, and the role of the microcosm — of the conferences on road engineering — as an environment where this urbanity was conceived.

This idea of the road conference as microcosm is not limited to the clearly circumscribed space of the conference room where all the *Hommes de la Route* gathered. The term refers to the conference as an event — a moment in time and space — that partially takes place in the conference room, but that is also related to different places on the Belgian territory. Places that played a role in framing the discourse of the modern roads are: the construction sites of new roads, the quarries where stones were excavated for the new roads, the laboratories where researchers were exploring the possibilities of new materials, temporary exhibitions on road history, and touristic sites that served as destinations for the first motorists.⁶ These locations were instrumental in that they brought the road to the centre of the debate about the future of Belgium as a prosperous urbanized nation; after all, these roads had been neglected for several decades. Charles Lagasse de Loch described this in 1910 in the following way:

Hélas! Au contraire, combien d'entre nous ont fait jadis un mariage de raison avec les routes! Nos inclinations allaient ailleurs, vers l'union avec ces brillantes et jeunes soeurs des Routes: les voies hydrauliques, les chemins de fer, les énergies électriques. Combien rêvent, peut-être, de jalonner, de parcourir, d'organiser, de contrôler les voies atmosphériques! C'est que jadis la Route était une vieille dame, comptant de nombreux quartiers de noblesse, sans doute, mais si délaissée! Malgré cet abandon presque général, la plupart d'entre nous n'ont point tourné le dos à la pauvre oubliée. Nous l'avons soignée avec abnégation, en attendant les temps meilleurs. Et ils sont venus. Et voici que les Congrès de la Route prennent, d'emblée, une

6 David Peleman, 'Making Place for the Modern Road: The Road Exhibitions in Brussels (1910) and Liège (1930)', *Transfers*, 5 (1) (2015), 51–68; David Peleman and Pieter Uyttenhove, 'Engineering the Rural Idyll. Road Construction and the Peri-Urban Landscape in Belgium, 1925–1940', *Landscape Research*, 37 (4) (2012), 417–35; David Peleman and Bruno Notteboom, 'Picturing the Perfect Setting: The Mediation of Landscape and the Road Engineering Project in Belgium, 1925–1962', *Journal of Architecture*, 17 (1) (2012), 69–96.

importance au moins aussi grande que ceux de la navigation et des chemins de fer.⁷

[Alas! On the contrary, how many among us have established a marriage of convenience with the roads in the past! Our affection was directed elsewhere, towards the union with the roads' brilliant and young sisters: the waterways, the railways, the electricity networks. How many among us are even dreaming of marking out, crossing, organizing and controlling the airways! All this because the road used to be an old lady, who counted many noble quarters, without any doubt, but she was so neglected. However, despite this almost complete resignation, most of us have not turned our back on the poor neglected lady. We have taken care of her with abnegation, waiting for better times to come. And they have come. Without any resistance, today road conferences have gained as much importance as the conferences on waterways and railways.]

As Charles Lagasse de Loch, president of the second international conference in Brussels, claims in this quote, the road was an 'old lady' during the nineteenth century whom *Les Hommes de la Route* tried to make look a bit younger, just like her sisters (the railways, canals, electricity). The road conference was the *boudoir* of this lady, where the entire metamorphosis or makeover was conceived. In the *boudoir*, prominent engineers, politicians, and industrials who were dedicated to this task met and exchanged ideas and knowledge about how to achieve their goal. They did so under the all-seeing eye of the Belgian king — King Albert, and from 1934 onwards King Leopold III — who had been appointed as a patron of the event, since this new large technical system required not only different forms of expertise and knowledge, but was also in need of status and credibility.

In the precarious context of a new collaboration between different fields of expertise — engineers, industrials, building contractors — the reference to the *boudoir* serves as a metaphor for the exceptional position and role of the road conference. This conference was an ambiguous place, since its status had to be situated between the public and the private, between the political and the economic, between the general interest represented by the state and the economic concerns of the road industry. This kind of in-between situation was new for *Les Hommes de la Route*, and it temporarily created a somewhat surreal and dreamlike atmosphere which characterized the events of the conference. As Lagasse de Loch described in his closing remarks

7 Association Internationale Permanente des Congrès de la Route, *Ile Congrès International de la Route, Bruxelles 1910. Compte rendu des travaux du congrès* (Paris: Générale Lahure, 1911), p. 231.

at the first international road conference in Paris in 1908, quoted here at the beginning of the chapter, 'the event that week had been like a dream to him', but simultaneously it had fulfilled a solid and reliable scientific role by founding a centralized laboratory for the association, in order to universalize the results of scientific research about roads.

The Road Conference Reframed

In what way did the road conference function as an instrument for reframing the project of the modern road between culture and science? The road conference marks the transition of the road project from a mere engineering task — initiated by the state and its engineering corps — to a new collaboration between different disciplines, initiated by *Les Hommes de la Route*.⁸ This road conference is not just another manifestation of science, or another gathering of *Les Hommes de la Route*, similar to previous events which took place, for example, in the context of the Belgian Road Union or the Belgian Road Federation. It is a place where the traditional boundaries between politics and science blur at the moment when *Les Hommes de la Route* are trying to define their project from different perspectives at the same time — as suggested in the quotation by Bruno Latour at the beginning of the chapter. Although the organizational scheme of the conference was based on strict scientific rules which tried to 'label' every speaker and his competences, one could say there was more at stake at these events, transforming these occasions into *urban microcosms*.

The first international road conference was held in Paris in 1908, and it was attended by a large Belgian delegation lobbying for the organization of the next event, which would eventually take place in Brussels in 1910. These international road conferences need to be considered as a first tryout and a benchmark for the Belgian *Hommes de la Route*, who would set up their own conference two decades later. The first Belgian road conference took place in 1930 in Liège, and three more similar events followed before the Second World War: Antwerp 1933, Brussels 1935, and Ghent 1938. The conferences were the indispensable complement of the Belgian state's apparatus for the construction of modern roads for motorized traffic. Until the 1920s, the national debate about roads was to a large extent a political

8 For an extensive description of the culture of *Les Hommes de la route*, see my doctoral dissertation: David Peleman, *Les Hommes de la route. Engineering the Urban Society of the Modern Road in Belgium, 1889–1962* (Ghent: Ghent University, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, 2013).

one which took place in parliament once a year, when politicians decided about the annual budget for the Ministry of Public Works. It was driven by political and economic motives, aiming to find a proper balance between local, regional and national interests.⁹ Once decisions had been taken in parliament — in terms of budget, priorities, etc. — the engineers of the Ministry were put to work to plan and realize the various projects.

The road conferences were a game-changer in this rigid nineteenth-century approach, and they went hand in hand with a reorientation of the applied sciences and the role of the engineers in society in large parts of Europe.¹⁰ Tourist organizations, industrials, building contractors, entrepreneurs, motorists; they all entered the game, searching for an appropriate way to deal with the new conditions of road construction, and they all had their own reasons (economic, political, financial, civic, scientific) for doing so. All of them were confronted with the sudden growing complexity of the road, caused by increased mobility, new construction techniques, and the emergence of traffic rules. This partially explains the specific constellation of the Belgian road conference as well as the ambitions of the organization. These events were not an initiative of the government. When the first conference took place, this was mainly the achievement of a rather small group of people who received support from fellow researchers, industrialists, and motorists. Ferdinand Campus (a professor at the University of Liège) and Fernand Dupont (chief engineer of the province of Liège) were two of the driving forces behind the project. As scientists and engineers, both were convinced of the necessity of improving the road network and believed that the exchange of knowledge between different disciplines was crucial for the success of the road project as a new and pivotal episode in the history of public works.¹¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, building contractors who specialized in road construction had already set up regional organizations to stand stronger against what they

9 This changed slightly in 1928 when a Superior Advisory Board for the Road — 'Conseil Supérieur de la Route' — was founded. This board advised the Ministry of Public Works and its engineers in establishing priorities for the modernization of the road network. H. Bael, 'Le Conseil supérieur de la Route', *La Route belge*, 35 (1) (1928); Anon., 'Conseil Supérieur de la Route. Rapport au roi. Composition du conseil', *Annales des travaux publics de Belgique*, 81 (3) (1928), 361–76.

10 *The Organization of Science and Technology in France 1808–1914*, ed. by Robert Fox and George Weisz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

11 Pierre Holoffe, 'L'Oeuvre de l'Association Permanente des Congrès Belges de la Route', *Routes*, 1 (9) (1950), 7–9.

described as the eclecticism of the administration.¹² Although these professional organizations were founded in a rather informal way — the first meetings were gatherings of road contractors in a small pub in Brussels in 1900¹³ — they soon gathered a considerable number of adherents, but in order to gain confidence among a wider audience, the entire framing of these gatherings had to be changed, and their ambitions became more precise. It is therefore not surprising to see how the road conferences also started playing an essential role in the 'education' of *Les Hommes de la Route* and prepared them for the fieldwork on construction sites or in laboratories¹⁴ — hence the repeated references at these conferences to the distinguished way of speaking of people who presented their reports. 'Passionate but courteous' discussions were highly esteemed, as it was expressed in the report of the 1910 conference in Brussels: 'Les questions portaient sur des points bien déterminés, et les discussions passionnées autant que courtoises auxquelles certaines d'entre elles ont donné lieu ont montré clairement la route à suivre pour les réunions ultérieures'¹⁵ [The questions dealt with well-defined items, and the compelling and courteous discussions which resulted from those questions have convincingly shown which direction to follow for the future meetings.]

The reports presented at the first Belgian road conference in Liège in 1930 — and the following ones — were in general based on the speakers' own experiences with the road project in their laboratories, in factories, on construction sites, or while acting as motorists themselves. They offered a rather eclectic set of presentations, dealing with a wide variety of topics. The conference served as a platform for the participants to share their experiences in this new field of enquiry with whomever was involved in the road project, and to analyse all the innovations that were realized in between the different events. The conference intended to collect all this information and put it at the disposal of the actors who were involved in the road project,

12 F. Maertens, 'Préface', in *Annuaire officiel de la Fédération des Entrepreneurs Belges de Voirie (FEBV)*, ed. by R. Dubois (Renaix: J. Leherie & Fils, 1933), pp. 3–5 (p. 4).

13 Anon., 'Fédération des Entrepreneurs Belges de Voirie', *Annuaire officiel de la Fédération des Entrepreneurs Belges de Voirie (FEBV)*, ed. by R. Dubois (Renaix: J. Leherie & Fils, 1933), pp. 7–13.

14 Anon., 'Le Congrès et l'Exposition de la Route à Namur', *Routes*, 1 (10) (1950), 7–9 (p. 7).

15 Association Internationale Permanente des Congrès de la Route, *Ile Congrès International de la Route, Bruxelles 1910*, p. 18.

treating topics as diverse as road construction, the technical qualities of road materials, signalization, road maintenance, and traffic rules. By doing so, the conference organizers explored the possibilities of creating and reaching a new audience for their project and gaining support in return.

Despite the often amateurish character of the contributions and interventions at the conference, and regardless of the occasional contradictory claims around technical procedures for road engineering, the conference was subject to a rigid organizational scheme, trying to install some scientific rigour and completeness. Each conference consisted of two sections: a first one entitled 'construction and maintenance' and a second entitled 'traffic and exploitation'. More cultural topics, such as urbanism and aesthetics — in the exceptional cases when they were put on the agenda of the conference — were generally placed in the second section, as part of the debate about traffic. However, a detailed analysis of the reports reveals only one part of the story. The conference was also a piece of eloquent theatre, and the conference's limited scientific character was complemented by the courteous behaviour of the contributors and speakers.

As was the case in the *boudoir*, special rules determined the 'game' that was being played at the conference, but everybody who was willing to obey the rules could enter the conference room and take part in the game. The road conference was 'a space of play' with many actors involved, and its final goal was to embed the modern road in society.¹⁶ Therefore, courteous behaviour and the art of addressing the audience in an entertaining way were much appreciated and they were considered an essential part of the distinguished play which scientific research was. As it was explained in the report of the 1930 conference in Liège, 'the distinction of the speaker, the purity of his language and the objectivity of his lecture' were crucial elements of the event:

Cette séance est ouverte à 9 heures par M. Dupont, président général du Congrès qui donne immédiatement la parole à M. Baume, pour son exposé sur 'Le goudron de houille et le bitume associés pour le revêtement des routes'. Cette conférence, faite avec projections lumineuses, a été suivie par le congressistes, avec l'attention la plus

16 Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene, 'The Space of Play: Towards a General Theory of Heterotopia', in *Heterotopia and the City. Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, ed. by Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 87–102.

grande. Il importe de noter la distinction du conférencier, la pureté de la langue qu'il parle, et la grande objectivité de son exposé.¹⁷

[This session is opened at 9 o'clock by Mr Dupont, general president of the conference, who immediately gives the word to Mr Baume for his explanation on 'Coal tar and related bitumen for the covering of roads'. This lecture, with luminous projections, was followed with the utmost attention by the conference members. It is important to notice the distinctive behaviour of the speaker, the purity of his language and the objectivity of his account.]

This indicates how courteous behaviour was a valid alternative when a lack of scientific character occurred and it gave credibility to the play that was staged. But the play of the conference wasn't limited to the confined space of the conference room. It also encompassed those sites that were crucial for the appearance of the nation and its road project. In 1910, the conference members did not only pass by Ostend, Spa, Dinant — all of them essential stopovers on a touristic trip through Belgium at that time — but they also visited the stone quarries of Lessines and Quenast.¹⁸ These played a crucial role for the construction of paved roads in Belgium, and the group was guided through the quarry where they were able 'to admire the ingenious mechanical equipment' and 'the most surprising and endearing spectacle of industrial activity'.¹⁹ A few moments later, standing on the edge of the open mine pit, they could observe 'the fantastic scenery' of three thousand workers doing their job, which provided a 'magnificent spectacle' to the conference members.²⁰ It was followed by the apotheosis of their visit, namely the observation of a number of explosions in the mine, 'a splendorous and moving spectacle'.²¹

A similar astonishment for the marvels of technology and industrial equipment continued to characterize the conferences of the 1930s. During conference tours the members went to see various construction sites in Belgium, and their tours through Belgium received a lot of attention in the reports which were published afterwards, with

17 Anon., 'Séance de clôture du congrès', in *Premier Congrès National de la Route. Liège 1930. Renseignements généraux et compte-rendu des travaux*, Anon. (Liège: Georges Thone, 1930), pp. 102–17 (p. 102).

18 Association Internationale Permanente des Congrès de la Route, *Ile Congrès International de la Route, Bruxelles 1910*, pp. 467–529.

19 Ibid., p. 476.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 478.

extensive and minute descriptions of the trips. In 1933, the conference members passed by modern roads that were under construction to the north of Antwerp and a local cement factory.²² In 1935, there was a visit to the stone quarry of Quenast and to the Philips pavilions at the *World Exhibition* in Brussels.²³ In 1938, the conference members visited the construction site of the highway between Brussels and Ostend, displaying a keen interest in the advanced machinery that was used for this project.²⁴ This fascination for a 'technological sublime' — the extraordinary but also aesthetic fascination for the products of technological progress — was a 'mannerism' which can also be traced in some of the reports that were presented at the conference and which — so I believe — cannot be explained by way of their contribution to the scientific debate at these events.²⁵ In 1935, the architect Octave Vandenhoeck presented a report with a proposal for the construction of the Belgian highways, suggesting these could be built on top of the existing railway network, and a sort of 'car-station' would take care of the access to this road network.²⁶ Georges Labrique, a prolific writer in the magazine *La Route belge* [The Belgian Road] presented a proposal for 'grand modern roads' or highways, which looked like broad urban boulevards flanked by houses.²⁷ The fact that these remarkable and by all means absurd proposals were welcomed at the road conferences, as well as the fact that they were given such a prominent place, adds to the exceptional character of the events. Exceptional in the sense that they were 'laboratories': they were spaces where *Les Hommes de la Route* not only displayed their road project and its scientific merits, but also where the participants tried to found their own (distinctive) culture. It is illustrated in a pictorial and slightly surrealistic way with this quote from the Belgian road conference in 1930, which captures the atmosphere of the conference as microcosm where the orchestra starts playing a song entitled 'Vers l'avenir' [Towards the future], once the president

22 Association Permanente des Congrès Belges de la Route, *Ile Congrès, Anvers. Compte rendu des travaux* (Brussels: APCBR, 1933), pp. 290–302.

23 Ibid., pp. 372–401.

24 Anon., 'Réceptions — fêtes — excursions', *Bulletin de l'Association Permanente des Congrès Belges de la Route*, 7 (12) (1938), 112–46.

25 David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

26 Octave Vandenhoeck, *Autostrades* (Brussels: A. Defrenne, 1935). Report presented at the third Belgian road conference.

27 Georges Labrique, *Les Grand'routes modernes en Belgique* (Brussels: A. Defrenne, 1935). Report presented at the third Belgian road conference.

of the conference has finished his speech about the scientific virtues of the event.

Notre intention et, partant, notre seul désir est de délimiter un premier champ de recherches, d'y déterminer les points qui feront l'objet de notre activité de demain et, en ce faisant, nous croyons que nous aurons pleinement rempli notre tâche. La valeur des études qui nous sont parvenues, le nombre et la qualité de nos congressistes nous permettent de dire que nos travaux s'ouvrent sous les plus heureux auspices et j'ose émettre le ferme espoir que nous retirerons de nos discussions et de nos délibérations les plus précieux enseignements.

*** Pendant que l'orchestre se fait à nouveau entendre en jouant 'Vers l'Avenir', le public s'écoule lentement: les uns commentent les discours qu'ils viennent d'entendre, les autres songent aux séances de travail qui commencent le même jour à 2 heures et demie.²⁸

[Our intention and, consequently, our only desire is to mark out a first field of research, to determine the elements that will become the subject of our activity, and, by doing so, we believe we will have entirely fulfilled our task. The value of studies which we have come across, the number and quality of conference members allow us to state that our work is very promising, and I dare to express the strong hope that we will learn the most valuable lessons from our deliberations and discussions. *** While the orchestra picks up the thread again by playing 'Towards the Future', the public slowly leaves the room: some are commenting upon the lecture they just heard, while others are thinking about the work sessions that are about to start the same day at half past two.]

The Road Conference as an Urban Microcosm

In the *boudoir*, at the road conference, the scientific conditions of the construction site or the laboratory were temporarily suspended and replaced by a theatrical performance that reframed the position of the modern road as part of a more comprehensive public sphere with a more diversified audience. This audience consisted of personalities with the most diverse backgrounds who shared a particular interest in the development of modern roads and motorized traffic. The exceptional character of the road conference was partially due to the fact that these people who were facing the technical and social

28 Anon., 'Séance inaugurale. Discours de M. Dupont, Président Général du Congrès', in *Premier Congrès National de la Route. Liège 1930. Renseignements généraux et compte-rendu des travaux*, Anon. (Liège: Georges Thone, 1930), pp. 45-46. End of the speech by President Dupont, followed by a description of the event.

challenges of the modern road and modern traffic — *Les Hommes de la Route* — were able to look beyond the boundaries of their own field of knowledge at the conferences. At these events they transgressed the borders of their disciplines, left the isolated space of their work table or laboratory and created new communities where they were confronted with advanced insights or where they met their peers. The conference was a cosmos exactly because it facilitated this coexistence of different opinions and various fields of knowledge (of craftsmen, politicians, scientists) in an unconstrained way. It was a discursive microcosm where different sorts of discourses interacted. To explain it in the words of Isabelle Stengers, the microcosm or the small cosmos of the conference gives rise to a question:

[...] la question des modes de coexistence possible, sans hiérarchie, de l'ensemble des inventions de non-équivalence, de valeurs et d'obligations par où s'affirment les existences enchevêtrées qui le composent. Il intègre donc, sur un mode problématique, la question d'une écologie des pratiques qui fasse exister ensemble nos cités où s'invente le politique [...].²⁹

[It (the cosmos) gives rise to the question concerning possible modes of coexistence without hierarchy, of a set of non-equivalent inventions, of values and of obligations by which the tangled existences that compose it are confirmed. So, it integrates, in a problematizing way, the question of an ecology of practices that allows our cities, where politics are invented, to coexist [...].]

The road conference was a device that forced its participants — entrepreneurs, scientists, technicians, building contractors, motorists, etc. — to take a position and form an opinion about the project in which they were engaged. In doing so, it aimed to turn *Les Hommes de la Route* into citizens, and in this way the conference acted as a truly *urban* microcosm.³⁰ As Bruno Latour observed: 'On ne naît

29 Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques*, 2 vols (Paris: La Découverte, 2003) II, p. 339.

30 The conference did not exist as an isolated event where the entire discourse of the road project was moulded for the public debate. It was part of a more extensive 'topology' of urban microcosms, and in my doctoral dissertation I analysed the road project not as a territorial project or as a built project, but as a discourse that was related to a topology of six places: the conference room, the laboratory and the factory, the city, the landscape, the street and the square, the museum and history. All of these were real places or references to places that occurred in the magazines, reports and publicity campaigns of *Les Hommes de la Route* and were instrumental for their public discourse on the road project. See David Peleman, *Les Hommes de la Route*.

pas citoyen, on le devient — à condition d'avoir un organe qui vous apprenne à opiner'³¹ [You are not born a citizen but you become one — on the condition that there is a device or mechanism that teaches you how to form an opinion].

31 Bruno Latour, *Cogitamus. Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), p. 174.